

The Coaching Process

An Effective Tool for Professional Development

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A model for coaching in nursing is described. Criteria for selecting a coach are discussed. Competencies for a coach are recommended. In addition, guidelines for coaching sessions are provided as well as an example of an action plan outline to help the coachee identify areas of desired growth and options for developing these areas. **Key words:** *appreciative inquiry, behavioral effectiveness, coaching framework for nursing, communication dynamics, leadership effectiveness, relationship based*

TO be successful in leadership positions, a key ingredient is the ability to successfully encourage and support the personal and professional growth of nurses reporting to the leader. In this article, the described coaching behavior is quite different from traditional management behavior. Or, as Ray Smith, former CEO of Bell-Atlantic, once related, "To create a high-performance team, we must replace typical management activities like supervising, checking, monitoring, and controlling with new behaviors like coaching and communicating."^{1(p215)} Coaching for improved performance can drive excellence through unleashing human potential.²⁻⁵

Some leaders may feel accomplished and believe they can function successfully, so why have a coach? What about Tiger Woods or the Williams sisters? They have coaches. According to Zemke,⁶ experienced administra-

tors can gain invaluable help from a coach through a process of performance evaluation in difficult situations. This process can significantly improve future performance. At the same time, a set of coaching skills to use with others supports the development of employees reporting to the leader. For example, Hargrove⁷ suggested that in order to meet the needs of employees today, leaders must dedicate 30% to 40% of their time in coaching the professionals reporting to them. Through coaching, these nurses can be encouraged to work creatively on problems facing their areas of responsibility in a positive, constructive way.

Because the coaching model for nursing is in its embryonic stages, specific tools and a framework for use of these tools is needed. A concerted effort has been made to develop not only a coaching model but also the corresponding coaching competencies. In Figure 1, the coaching model for nurses, which has been constructed using practices from the business community, is described.^{1,7-13} This model consists of 3 major components: "the foundation" for the coaching process; "the learning process," which occurs during coaching; and "taking action," which encompasses changes in behavior.

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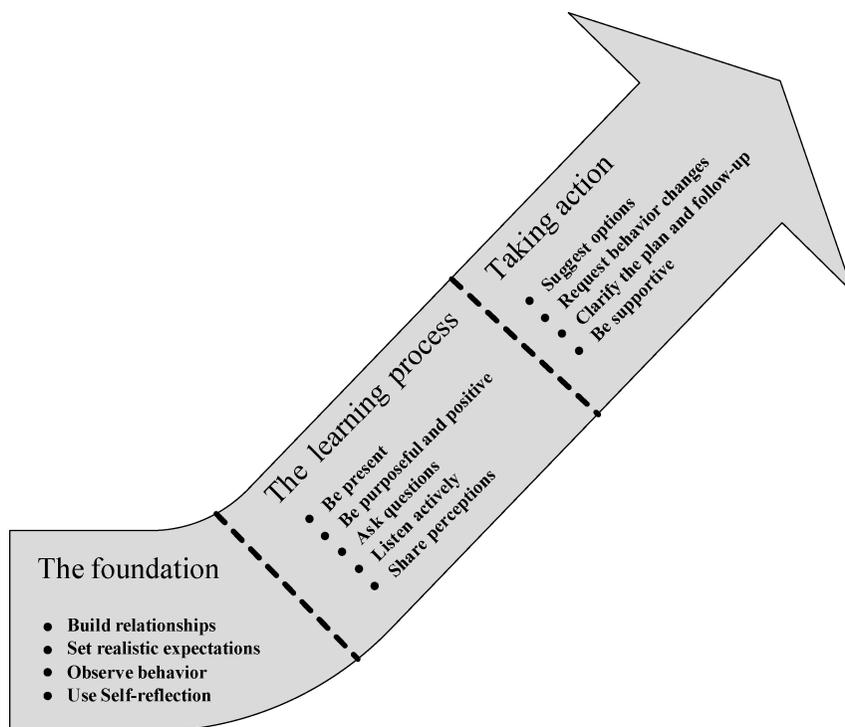


Figure 1. The nursing coaching model.

SELECTING A COACH

A critical aspect of coaching is selecting an appropriate coach (see Table 1 for guidelines in this process). The coach is a critical lynchpin to the success of the process and must be selected wisely. Often, it is more appropriate to choose someone other than the direct supervisor.¹⁴ Since a trusting relationship is essential for coaching, it may be difficult to share fears, or issues that might place the coachee in a negative perspective, with the person responsible for performance evaluation and advancement. At the same time, it is difficult to coach someone who is a "good" or "best friend." It is too easy for the session to focus on feelings and activities *not* related to professional development. In addition, it can be more difficult for the coach to give constructive feedback to a good friend. Following the coach selection guidelines will support the selection of an appropriate coach (Table 1).

THE FOUNDATION

The foundation aspect of the coaching process is composed of 4 behaviors: "building relationships" between the coach and the coachee; "setting realistic expectations" for the process; "observing the coachee behavior"; and the practice of "self-reflection on the part of the coach."

Building relationships

The coaching relationship has been described as a cocreative relationship. Fundamentally, this partnership emerges from an understanding that coach and coachee are both highly functioning individuals. The coachee specifically seeks a partner to assist in visioning, planning, and achieving accountability for improving performance.¹⁵ The coachee is responsible for his or her success. In addition, the coachee is responsible for establishing an agenda for each coaching session. The coach serves to

Table 1. Guidelines for selecting a coach*

1. Does the person has knowledge and skills in the areas that you need to develop?
2. Does this person has the ability to coach and teach you?
3. Is the person a leader as exemplified by his or her actions that you have observed in groups and on committees?
4. Is the person respected in the organization and by senior administration?
5. Does this person has a grasp of the important aspects of the organization such as the mission, values, and the politics of the organizational structure?
6. Is this person willing and able to devote the time and energy required to develop and maintain the relationship required to do effective coaching?
7. Do you trust this person to maintain confidentiality?
8. Is the person a collaborator and willing to collaborate with you in the coaching process?
9. Will this person provide you with both positive and constructive feedbacks?
10. Can this person support you in identifying what you need to learn, areas of growth, and provide structure to this learning?

*Adapted from Baker et al.⁹

clarify and transform the agenda into action steps through listening intently, asking powerful questions, and serving as a catalyst in moving the coachee toward taking action and achieving desired solutions. Unique to the coaching relationship is mutual awareness of inherent strengths of each other as well as the value of an objective person to reinforce and assist the coachee in the process of learning and growing through inquiry, understanding, and shifting identified nonproductive behaviors. The coach's total focus is on the coachee, and the coachee must be willing to be coached as demonstrated by such behaviors as providing the agenda for each session, developing meaningful projects for the area of responsibility, and changing behaviors that do not work.

For the coach, the specific aspects of building a relationship includes 3 essential steps: beginning with a positive mind set; collecting appropriate information through asking the right questions; and demonstrating thoughtful and unexpected acts of kindness that demonstrate the importance of the relationship.¹⁶

Setting realistic expectations

As a coach, the primary responsibility is to listen to the coaching agenda, empower the coachee toward solutions, and to focus

on what the coachee wants. The coachee is responsible for bringing the agenda, making a commitment to achieving goals, providing feedback to the coach regarding what has worked well and what has not, and participating actively in the coaching session. Coaches do not consult or advise on the basis of analysis or diagnosis of problems. These sessions are not therapy sessions. Rather, the coach may be described as a "thinking partner"¹⁵ who empowers the coachee to achieve the described goals.

The coaching relationship develops optimal momentum when the commitment to meet, in person or by phone, is established at the beginning of the relationship. Typically, the commitment is for a 3- to 6-month time frame and the coaching pair meets 3 to 4 times per month, or once per week. Sessions are for approximately 60 minutes, with some flexibility. It is important to establish who initiates the contact, as well as how the relationship is established and maintained.

Observing behavior

As the coachee begins to describe the agenda for each session, the coach is provided with issues with which the coachee may be struggling or the development of a desired action plan. Listening for missing pieces of a

story or asking for a description of a desired outcome serves to illustrate for the coachee an alternative perspective from which to mobilize action. At the same time, the coach is able to reinforce behavioral strengths that have been described by the coachee. Reframing events, identifying strengths to leverage, and obstacles to overcome on the part of the coachee provide multiple options for both change in perspective and action steps to address the initial agenda.

Use of self-reflection

As a coach, listening and reflecting back to the coachee the exact words used, the sound and feel of the voice tonality, and energy patterns all serve to create feedback and potential prompts for a change in the coachee's awareness. At the same time, the coach must also practice self-reflection and review the tonality and observations made to the coachee. In this reflection, the coach can discover whether there may have been other approaches that would have been more helpful to the coachee. Were the desired objectives accomplished? Self-reflection can serve to problem solve in a systematic way that has the potential to transform future behaviors and action for both the coach and the coachee.¹⁷ In the coaching relationship, both coach and coachee understand the inherent value of honest, confidential conversation as essential for personal growth and development. Each session could end with a review of what was useful about the session and what was not useful for both the coach and the coachee.

THE LEARNING PROCESS

The learning process occurs during the time frame of this coaching process, however long the process lasts. It consists of the art of being "present," the method of being purposeful and "positive," the skill of "asking questions," the ability to "listen actively," and the grace and style with which to "share perceptions."

The art of being present

With the intense demands on time and energy in healthcare today, it is easy for a leader to be scattered, frenzied, and anxious. This emotional distress can translate into people feeling unimportant and discounted. In the coaching session, it is critical to remove unnecessary distractions, such as forwarding the phone, and turning off the computer. It is important to make good eye contact, face the coachee directly, be emotionally honest, and listen with intelligence while internalizing and interpreting meaning with compassion and caring. These attending behaviors not only indicate "presence" but also are potent in building rapport and trust.

Being purposeful and positive

These sessions are not for gossiping and sharing extraneous information. The coaching session is for discussion of what is and is not working for the coachee related to the work environment. This is the reason for developing an agenda and for having a format for the session. One example of such an agenda can be found in Table 2. With a specific format, which can be developed in writing on the computer, it is quite easy to remain focused on the topics to be covered in each session. Notes from previous sessions can easily be reviewed. It is also easy to see progress in comparison to early sessions.

It is critical to focus on the positive. Focus on the successes, on the approaches the coachee uses that have and do work. The coach's responsibility is to reinforce these positives. Often the coachee is very tough on him- or herself, and it is difficult to see the successes, the progress, or the changes. This is another reason to end each session with a success that has occurred since the previous session.

Asking questions

The most important tool the coach possesses is the ability to ask powerful, thought-provoking questions. The purpose of

Table 2. Guidelines for constructive work in a coaching session*

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What has the time been like since the last coaching meeting? Review any agreements from the previous meeting. 2. What agenda items does the coachee want to discuss for this meeting? Make a list. 3. Are there any interpersonal issues between the coach and the coachee that need to be addressed? 4. What are the 3 most difficult situations encountered since the last meeting? 5. Discuss these situations including what worked and what did not work. Is there any “clean up” that needs to be done? What is the plan for addressing the needed repair? 6. Review any agenda items not covered. 7. Identify and discuss at least one success/achievement since the last meeting. 8. What are the 3 most important things to be accomplished prior to the next meeting? How will these be address (the plan)? 9. Be clear about the time and place of the next meeting

*It is preferable to have documentation of the coaching meeting including issues addressed and the corresponding plan. This can be done on the computer, preferably by the coachee, with copies to both the coach and the coachee.

questions is to discover what the coachees are thinking and what they perceive about difficult situations, both about themselves and about others. Use open-ended questions that genuinely invite sharing such as who, what, when, and where. Phrases such as how does that affect. . . , what did you notice about. . . , or what were your expectations when. . . are examples of such questions. An example of a helpful framework uses the vowels A, E, I, O, U.

A = Awareness of what has been noticed;

E = Experience of thoughts and feelings associated with whatever happened;

I = Intention in the situation including the purpose and goals;

O = Ownership of the coachee’s part in the outcome; and

U = Understanding of the situation and the outcomes by the coachee.

Eighty percent of the conversation needs to be what the coachee says, while 20% is what the coach says. This is an indicator of the importance of listening.

Active listening

Listening deeply demonstrates respect and builds mutual trust through empathy and sen-

sitivity. To be totally focused on what another human being is saying is the highest form of recognition and acknowledgment. Many people travel through life, never feeling heard or understood. So the ability to listen actively is a gift to the coachee. Listening deeply translates as the ability to reflect back to the coachee not only a summary of what was said but also an interpretation of the intended meaning. The coachee will be enabled by deep listening and the follow-up questions that result in additional clarity and understanding. This skill is very important to leader success, and the ability to fine-tune this skill through a coaching relationship is a gift to the coach.

Share perspectives

During the session, it is valuable to share observations and experience with the coachee. These perspectives can focus on 3 critical aspects of the job: job performance, leader behaviors, and interpersonal relationships and their maintenance. What is important is for the coach to be fair, objective, and factual when sharing perspectives. A judgmental approach in which the coachee is made wrong or discounted in some way is inappropriate and usually unsuccessful. It is usually more useful to use questions to lead

Table 3. Guidelines for an action plan

<p>1. Developmental plan</p> <p><i>Goal:</i> Identify a major goal for personal or professional development such as a specific role challenge, competency, or behavioral problem. Be clear and detailed. Explain how development in this area will enhance success.</p> <p><i>Descriptive process:</i> How will the person learn or gain this skill (ie, observation, training, advanced academic work, membership on a committee, etc)</p> <p><i>Behavioral description:</i> Define the support needed to accomplish the goal or learning.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> How will the accomplishment of the goal be applied to the current role? (Be specific in describing the project, person, or group where it will be used.)</p> <p><i>Required support:</i> Define the support needed in applying this learning/goal.</p> <p><i>Tracking:</i> How will this process be broken up into subachievements or accomplishments?</p> <p><i>Completion plan:</i> Specify the date for achievement of the goal and how this will be documented.</p> <p>2. Developmental results</p> <p><i>Acquisition:</i> Evaluate the accomplishment of the goal by both the coach and the coachee. If the goal was even partially unmet, list the reasons why.</p> <p><i>Application:</i> Assess the ability to apply the behavior, skill, or knowledge. If these goals were not met, identify what the obstacles were and the reasons for lack of results.</p> <p><i>Learning:</i> What was learned, during the process, about development of skills or knowledge or about changing behavior?</p> <p><i>Future application:</i> Identify probable future application of new behaviors, knowledge, or skills.</p> <p><i>Additional learning:</i> What additional or unanticipated knowledge or skills were attained?</p> <p><i>Process evaluation:</i> What could have made the development process more efficient, effective, or rewarding?</p> <p><i>Insights:</i> What additional insights into leadership/management were acquired?</p>

*Adapted from Yoder-Wise and Kowalski.¹

the coachee through a process of discovery of how to be more successful in approaching difficult situations, in shifting his or her behaviors, and in working toward meaningful professional relationships. One approach might be to share the impact the coachee's behavior might have had on the coach if he or she was the recipient of the behavior or activity.

The coach can make valuable and enlightening connections between actions or behaviors by the coachee and the results or outcomes (what happened in the given situation). Any behavior usually has both helpful and unhelpful (unintended) consequences. These can be identified for the coachee. It is also important to use "I" statements rather than "you" statements. Although coaches might say "of course," in fact each of

us would be amazed at the number of "you" statements made each day. Being conscious (and self-reflective) of vocabulary and how it is used helps the coach be more successful.

TAKING ACTION

"Taking action" is a process whereby options are suggested and evaluated, the request for changes in behavior occurs, the plan is clarified, follow-up on the action plan occurs, and there is clear evidence of support for the coachee in this process.

Suggest options

Discovering options can begin with the coach asking the coachee what ideas and suggestions he or she has for a given situation.¹³

Table 4. Coaching competencies—beginning or novice level

- Establish a relationship of trust and respect with the coachee
 - Demonstrate confidence in honesty and reliability
- Assist coachee in setting an agenda for regular check-ins
 - Demonstrate active support for behavioral change
- Demonstrate active listening
 - Demonstrate ability to consciously hear and advise on the basis of inherent wisdom
- Formulate and ask powerful, direct questions
 - Demonstrate attentiveness through appreciative, reflective inquiry
- Demonstrate positive regard and respect for the coachee
 - Model and reflect possibilities for growth
- Engage in direct communication
 - Model clear, straightforward exchange of information
- Stimulate self-reflection and self-awareness
 - Model and reflect back information and images that supports individuals ability to respond with personal mastery
- Support the design and implementation of action plans and associated behaviors
 - Demonstrate ability to define specific steps to support change and progress
- Monitor progress toward goals and stimulate course correction as appropriate
 - Demonstrate ability to watch for and reinforce positive change
- Honor confidentiality
 - Demonstrate ability to assure privacy

Since empowerment evolves from encouraging people to be engaged, to think critically, and to tap their creativity, it follows that an effective strategy is to ask “what if” questions in an effort to create options. In addition to asking questions, the coach can also share experience. “I found myself in a similar situation and this is what I discovered,” “I have an idea. . .,” or “Have you thought about. . .” Creating more than one option is helpful and it provides the coachee with choices.

Request behavior changes

If options were not implemented or suggestions were not acted upon, there may be an additional issue. The coach can review what the agreements or commitment was and first attempt to discover what prohibited the agreement being kept or what prevented the commitment from being enacted. The coach may need to be quite direct in asking for a change in behavior. For example, “I noticed that you have been consistently 5–15 minutes late for our coaching session, and one session

was missed entirely. What is the problem for you? . . . Can you see that I might feel disrespected? I might feel unappreciated for devoting time to you when it doesn’t seem possible for you to keep your commitments?” It is quite acceptable to be direct and to tell the truth. It is also helpful to ask how the coachee wants to handle the situation and then to offer alternatives and/or consequences.

Clarify the plan and follow-up

It is important that the plan for behavioral change or improved job performance be specific and measurable. It is unacceptable and a waste of the coach’s time for the sessions to “drift” with no clear outcomes and objectives unmet. The clearer the specific actions are, the easier it is to evaluate them and to discover what works and what does not work. For follow-up, the structure designed in the guidelines for the constructive session allows for written documentation of the various activities and plans and makes it simple to determine their fulfillment. In Table 3, an outline is given for how to proceed through a

developmental plan for learning and changing. Having agreements and commitments, goals and objectives in writing simplifies the process. Segments of the activity can be “chunked down” into manageable pieces so there is a sense of accomplishment.

Be supportive

Since this is a voluntary arrangement between coach and coachee, being seen as supportive is crucial. The coach must be able to convey confidence that the coachee will be successful in the plan and the effort. It is helpful to simply ask, “How can I support you?” “What do you need from me?” Whatever is within the coach’s control and is reasonable should be implemented. It could be valuable for the coach to connect with the coachee at critical points just to serve as a “sounding board” to provide a positive affirmation and to be a “cheer leader.” It is about being clear that the coachee *can do* whatever they have set out to accomplish.

COACHING COMPETENCIES

In describing the competencies associated with coaching, it is important to recognize that Benner’s¹⁸ work in examining knowledge and skill maturation, from novice to expert, can relate to coaching competencies as well. Benner’s work is grounded in the idea that experience (coaching/clinical practice) provides the opportunity to integrate and internalize theoretical knowledge into clinical expertise, or in this case, coaching exper-

tise. In reviewing the “coaching competencies” (Table 4), it is clear that the capacity to demonstrate knowledge of coaching models and competencies influences the coaching effectiveness. Furthermore, the coach must display confidence and personal mastery of self-reflection and growth, and exhibit the maturity and experience of changing behavior with intention and planning in order to positively influence the effectiveness of the coaching process. Appreciative inquiry serves as a foundation for assessing and building on strengths and successes, rather than focusing on what is wrong or deficient. These competencies are the beginning or the novice level of coaching and can be expanded upon as coaching evolves.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Coaching can support every level of the nursing organization from the chief nursing officer to the staff nurse. Finding the right coach who can assist and support ongoing continuous improvement is crucial for the growth of nursing practice and for improving the safety of patients and the quality of care they receive. The coaching approach creates an entirely different work environment. As progress is made, it will be critical to document the outcomes and create evidence that substantiates these outcomes. Although coaching for nurses, particularly nurses other than the senior administrative team, is in its infancy, it holds great potential for advancing the profession and care for patients and families.

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